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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 000095

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SUBJECT: MA DERIVES POLITICAL BOOST FROM HK VISA FLAP

REF: HONG KONG 00046

Classified By: AIT Director Douglas Paal, Reason: 1.4 (B/D)

11. (C) Summary: Taipei City Mayor Ma Ying-jeou has criticized the Hong Kong government for refusing his visa application to deliver two speeches and attend a seminar on culture and city management at two Hong Kong universities. A Ma confidant told AIT that a close friend of Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, while visiting Taipei in mid-December, told Ma in a private meeting that he had heard there might be some problems with securing approval for Ma's visa because of Ma's remarks on the Anti-Secession Law, and suggested that Ma should find an excuse to postpone the visit. Ma refused the advice, however, the ensuing drama may actually have boosted his popularity among the Taiwan electorate. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Taipei City Mayor Ma Ying-jeou on January 4 publicly called Hong Kong's rejection of his visa application a setback for Taiwan-Hong Kong relations. Ma was scheduled to visit Hong Kong January 10-12 to deliver two lectures at the University of Hong Kong and attend a seminar on culture and city management at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. In response to media speculation on January 5 that Hong Kong had refused his application because of his criticisms of the PRC's proposed anti-secession law, Ma said that Hong Kong had acted unwisely and questioned the sincerity of "One country, two systems." The implication that Beijing was behind Hong Kong's decision to refuse Ma's visa was reinforced when the local media reported on January 7 that Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa had sent envoys to Taiwan at the end of 2004 to discourage Ma from traveling to Hong Kong because of his statements against the anti-secession law.

13. (C) Taipei City Information Department Commissioner Jack Yu (Tzu-hsiang) told AIT that just after the Legislation Yuan election (LY), Yeh Kuo-hwa, who led a Hong Kong delegation to Taiwan to observe the LY election, told Ma in a private meeting that he had heard there might be some problems with securing approval for Ma's visa because of Ma's remarks on the anti-secession law. Yeh suggested to Ma that he should find an excuse to postpone the visit. Yu said that Ma was not certain whether or not Yeh was authorized by the Hong Kong government to convey this message, but because Yeh is close to Tung Chee-hwa, Ma could not rule out the possibility. In any case, Yeh said, Ma refused to cancel the trip.

14. (C) Yu said the Hong Kong authorities have not formally refused Ma's visa, rather they simply did not respond. Yu said that he did not know the mechanics of the Hong Kong application process, but that he did know the travel agents who handled the application had returned Ma's application without a visa. Yu noted that while Ma and his Office Director Zheng An-guo did not receive their visas, the other Taipei City officials scheduled to travel with Ma received their Hong Kong visas on January 4. Yu said that after the University of Hong Kong President and the Hong Kong coordinator of the trip separately telephoned Ma on January 5 to apologize, explaining that there might be some problems with his visa, Ma decided to go public about the refusal and his disappointment with "One country, two systems." Yu said that Ma canceled his January 10 trip and does not intend to say anything stronger, but he is still monitoring the situation.

15. (C) Speculating on why Ma's visa was refused, Yu said the PRC authorities fear that Ma might stir up Hong Kong public opinion concerning the proposed anti-secession law. He said that if Ma were asked about the law during the course of his Hong Kong visit, he would surely have criticized it, which, Beijing officials probably feared, might inflame public opinion against the proposed law or incite those who would object to Ma's criticisms of China. Either way, according to Yu, Beijing must have decided that it was not a good timing for Ma to visit Hong Kong.

16. (C) Comment: In the complex politics of Taiwan, Ma has emerged unscathed and probably helped politically by this incident. Executive Yuan Spokesman Chen Chi-mai on January 5 publicly defended Ma, saying Taipei would lodge a strong protest to Hong Kong if the Special Administrative Region authority did not provide a proper explanation on its

decision to deny Ma's visa. The incident has given China's critics in Taiwan ammunition against the "One country, two systems," a formula most people on Taiwan firmly reject for Taiwan. Mainland Affairs Council Vice Chairman Chiu Tai-san said on January 5 that this sort of treatment is a blow to the development of bilateral ties between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Hong Kong's refusal of his visa application might have even give Ma a boost in his effort to portray himself as a Taiwan politician. During the 2002 Mayoral race, Chen Shui-bian campaigning for Ma's DPP opponent said that Hong Kong-born Ma had "Hong Kong feet" (a word play on the Taiwanese term meaning athlete's foot), implying that Ma would take Taiwan down the path of Hong Kong and impose "One country, two systems" on Taiwan. The Taiwan electorate loves an underdog, and last week, as he was rebuffed by the PRC, Ma seemed an awful lot like one of their own. End Comment.  
PAAL